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## Steering groups as designers of school development processes

### Abstract

*This research article attempts to take initial stock of steering groups in terms of their prevalence, their roles and responsibilities in transformation processes, their positions in the organizational structure of schools, their influence on leadership self-concept, and also in terms of problems and dilemmas.*

*The article analyzes and evaluates the available empirical studies on steering groups, which also include the authors' own research, regarding said topics and attempts to place the formation of steering groups in an international context. Within this context the article also discusses the question of possible alternatives to steering groups.*

### Keywords

*School leadership; School development; School as a social organization; Organization development*

## Steuergruppen als Gestalter von Schulentwicklungsprozessen

### Zusammenfassung

*Der vorliegende Beitrag versucht eine erste Bilanz zu ziehen zur Verbreitung von Steuergruppen, zu deren Funktionen und Aufgaben bei Veränderungsprozessen, zur Verortung im organisatorischen Aufbau von Schulen, zum Einfluss auf das Führungsverständnis sowie zu Problemlagen und Dilemmata.*

*Der Beitrag wertet die bisher vorliegenden empirischen Untersuchungen, zu denen auch eigene gehören, für die genannten Thematiken aus und versucht, die Entwicklung von Steuergruppen in einen internationalen Kontext zu stellen. Im Rahmen des internationalen Kontextes wird auch die Frage diskutiert, ob es Alternativen zu Steuergruppen gibt.*

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## Schlagworte

*Schulführung; Schulentwicklung; Schule als soziale Organisation; Organisationsentwicklung*

## 1. Introduction

In 1972 Richard Schmuck, in collaboration with Philip Runkel, wrote the first systematic book on the subject of ‘school development as organization development’ (Schmuck, Runkel, Saturen, Martell, & Derr, 1972). Steering groups were not addressed in this text. These groups were first mentioned in 1990 by Dalin and Rolff, who began working with steering groups three years earlier: In 1987, the first so-called steering groups were explicitly set up at schools in Germany. Since then, many schools in German-speaking countries (Germany, Austria, Switzerland and Lichtenstein) have started working with steering groups. A national extension to the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2006 (PIRLS 2006; Bos et al., 2008) showed that 41% of elementary schools in Germany have a steering group (Berkemeyer & Feldhoff, 2010). For secondary schools, a survey conducted by the *Institute for School Development Research* (Institut für Schulentwicklungsforschung, IFS) at the University of Dortmund in 2006 showed that in the two years preceding the survey, 40% of all secondary school teachers in Germany had worked in steering groups (or in equivalent groups; Kanders & Rösner, 2006). However, despite the popularity and significance of steering groups in school practice, research has hardly addressed this subject, apart from the studies conducted by the IFS.

This research article attempts to portray the conceptual, theoretical and empirical findings on steering groups to date, based on the research work to accompany and evaluate the pilot project *Self-governing School in North Rhine-Westphalia*, Germany (Selbstständige Schule NRW). The first section of the article focuses on the role that steering groups play in school development and transformation processes from a conceptual, theoretical and empirical perspective. The second section deals with steering groups in school organization. In section 2.1, Dalin and Rolff’s (1990) concept of steering groups in schools is described, section 2.2 focuses on support for this concept by reference to a governance analysis which includes the categories organization and profession (section 2.2). Section three details the functions of steering groups by referring to two concepts of processes of change: organization development (section 3.1) and change management (section 3.2). Section four outlines the problems and dilemmas which result from specifics of constructing and establishing steering groups in schools. The outline of such problems is based on observations and practical experiences from working with, and within, steering groups. Section five deals with empirical results from two studies: Results from a project on *Quality Development in Networks in Lower Saxony*, and results from the pilot project *Self-governing School*. In a further section, we will regard the above mentioned models of steering and leading in the context of internation-

al research and we will scrutinize, in how far these models might serve as alternatives for steering groups.

Even if our knowledge on steering groups is mainly based on conceptual descriptions, which are results of practical experiences, we can support this knowledge through the few existing theoretical contributions (sections 2.2 and 3) and, furthermore, confirm it by the empirical results of our studies (section 5).

Rolff assumes that “the process of establishing a steering group signifies a further development for the school. With the establishment of an internal group of staff<sup>1</sup> that assumes responsibility for the process of managing school development projects, new forms of communication and cooperation, participation in decision-making processes, project development and project management are initiated that can signify the new quality of the school development work” (Rolff, 2004, p. 22, translation by the authors).

Steering groups were considered to be necessary and were therefore established by large-scale projects of school development in Germany such as the project *Quality Development in Networks in Lower Saxony*, the pilot project *Self-governing School in North Rhine-Westphalia* or the pilot project *Self-governing School Berlin*. Respectively, the projects made the establishment of steering groups a requirement for participation in their programs. The support systems in the German federal states, such as the institutes for further education, took up the subject of school development and steering groups as well. Over time, steering groups took on an increasing number of responsibilities and assumed the general coordination of all school development processes, as this was conceptually designated in the literature (Dalin & Rolff, 1990). The steering groups were the main contact for the different workgroups and project groups. Some schools established sophisticated models of structural and procedural organization in which the steering groups assumed a central position with regard to their responsibilities for managing school development.

Consequently, with continually growing requirements for each individual school (for instance through the development of outlines and programs for schools, internal and external evaluation, or by shifting the decision-making processes to the level of the individual schools), steering groups became increasingly significant (Berkemeyer, Brüsemeister, & Feldhoff, 2007).

Steering groups as non-hierarchical bodies appear to be specific to German-speaking countries. In contrast, particularly in the Anglo-American context, school administration has more leadership and management responsibilities. When management responsibilities are delegated in the Anglo-American context, this takes place in the form of hierarchical models of distributed leadership.

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1 The term ‘staff’ used in this article comprises the body of teachers and further teaching personnel in schools.

## 2. Localization of steering groups

When reconstructing the history of how steering groups at schools in German-speaking countries emerged, it can be observed that setting up school steering groups is a reflex to a problem which was identified and articulated by an external consultant when consulting schools in terms of organizational development. Consequently, external school consultants have discovered an organizational deficit, which in turn promoted the formation of steering groups. It became obvious that to design systematic school development processes that involve the entire staff of a school, not only the principals need to be involved. Although no intense consulting can be realized for the entire staff, a representatively selected steering group can facilitate a situation where the interests of the entire staff are considered. The newly created school steering groups then assumed management duties that were, and still are, primarily under the authority and responsibility of the principal.

### 2.1 Steering groups in the structural organization of the school

School development concerns all school actors: the school leadership and administration, staff, students and parents. For this reason, school development cannot simply be delegated to the steering group in the sense that the other actors are released from this job. The steering group can only function as an organization and work committee of the staff, without taking responsibilities away from the school leadership and staff (Rolff, 2009).

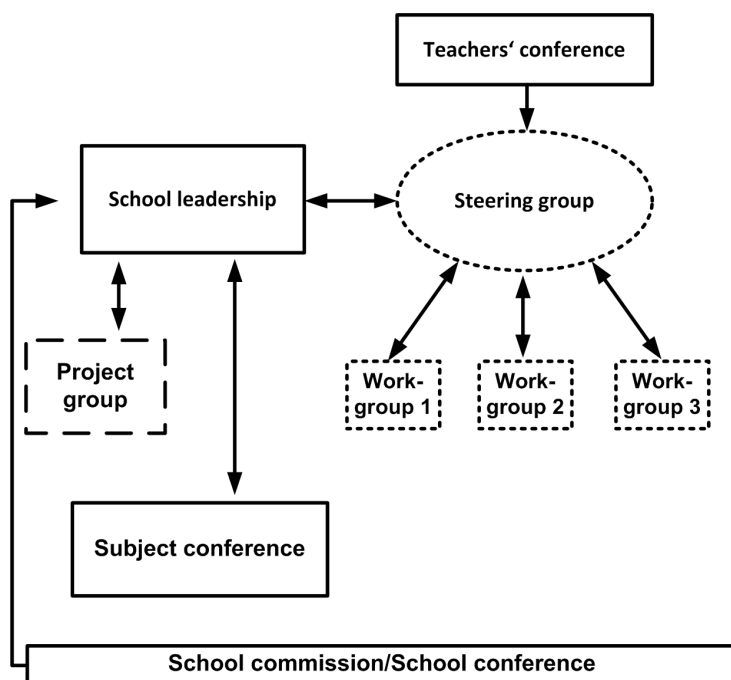
Even if the steering group is understood as a staff organization and work committee, this does not exclude the possibility that this group has decision-making competencies. The steering group only fulfils its responsibility and bears its name justifiably if it can and does make autonomous decisions on development processes. Due to a lack of involvement in the school hierarchy, making decisions is only legitimate and accepted if the steering group has been mandated by the staff. This mandate must be described clearly and needs to be limited with regard to both the responsibilities and the duration of the mandate. If this is neglected, problems of parallel structures and an unproductive competition may arise between the formal, structural organization of a school (governed by laws and regulations) on the one hand, and the process structure (for which the steering group is responsible) on the other.

Figure 1 shows that when establishing steering groups at schools, the formal organizational structure persists in terms of the school leadership, the school subject committee, the faculty meeting and the school conference without the responsibilities of these bodies being affected. In this formal structure, the decisions on content and results are made, while the process decisions are made in the steering

group. Overall, there is a complex “interior design” of boards and decision-making competencies.

Process decisions relate to everything that involves school development projects. To prevent the suspicion that parallel or competing structures might be established, membership in the steering group is usually limited to approximately two years. Re-election to the group, however, is possible. For the continuity of school and personnel development, it is beneficial if, after two years, some of the elected steering group members continue for a further year and newly elected members join this group.

**Figure 1:** The steering group in the structural organization of a school (“interior design”) (source: Rolff, 2007, 2009)



## 2.2 Steering groups as intermediary actors

Berkemeyer et al. (2007) describe steering groups as “intermediary” actors which are positioned between two conceptual dimensions, organization and profession. This view is based on the knowledge that ‘organization’ in schools is often considered to be negative and antagonizes many teachers. Their professional understanding mainly focuses on their pedagogic relationships to students in the various daily school settings. The specific contribution of steering groups to school organiza-

tion is their ability to “mutually ‘unlock’ the responsibilities and prospects of the organization and the profession in the school for both sides” (Berkemeyer et al., 2007, p. 62, translation by the authors). To study this point of view more closely, Berkemeyer et al. (2007) describe steering groups from the perspective of different organization theories – mixed approaches that also consider professional characteristics – and from the perspective of profession theory. The authors conclude that steering groups can be described from both perspectives, since these groups have both professional and organizational characteristics. Berkemeyer et al. (2007) regard precisely this dual characteristic as a strength of steering groups, which enables them to act as “agents of change”.

A central feature of the intermediary character of steering groups is the fact that they are not integrated into the formal hierarchy of schools. Steering groups assume problem- and project-related duties. Thus, they can have a close relationship to the work of teachers in the handling of their responsibilities, for instance as part of the development of instruction. Initially, they operate in a profession-forming capacity by illuminating options for actions in a quasi-consulting communication process. Through this problem-oriented approach with a narrow focus on the respective topic, steering groups should “not hastily [be] identified with organization” (Berkemeyer et al., 2007, p. 75, translation by the authors). Thus, they are less likely to be confronted with defensive attitudes of the staff in terms of an ‘anti-hierarchical effect’ (Krainz-Dürr, 2000). On the basis of such illuminating processes, steering groups choose in an organizational manner between appropriate options for action and take specific steps of further planning and implementation.

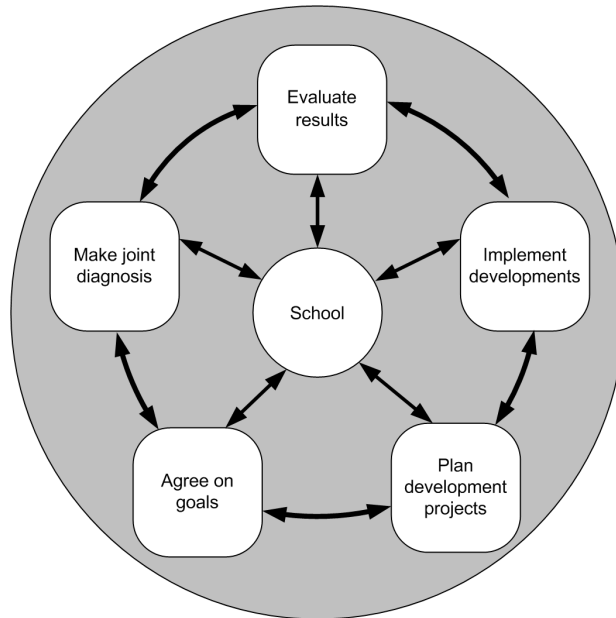
### **3. The responsibilities and work of steering groups in German-speaking countries**

As described at the outset, steering groups were introduced to manage organization development processes in schools as part of school development. Organization development is a concept of organizational change that deals with transformation processes of, and in, organizations. Concepts of organizational change generally assume the necessity of organizations to adapt to the requirements of a changing environment in order to ensure their survival and/or competitiveness (Wiegand, 1998). Between the different concepts of organizational change, such as organization development, organizational learning and change management, several common features can be identified. They all assume that transformation processes can be systematically designed and that members of organizations should be actively included in this process. The responsibilities of steering groups were described by Dalin and Rolff (1990) as well as Holtappels (2007) with reference to the concept of organizational change.

### 3.1 The work of steering groups as part of organization development processes

Dalin and Rolff (1990) elaborated the responsibilities of steering groups in the context of counseling schools in matters of organization development processes. According to Dalin and Rolff (ibid.), the main task of a steering group is managing organization development processes as part of school development. The steering group receives its mandate for this task from the teachers' conference. In terms of organizational development, this process is accomplished by the members of the respective school themselves, which should gain acceptance for the transformation processes and promote their sustainability. The tasks are oriented towards the 'classical' instruments of organization development as illustrated in the circular flow model (see Figure 2):

**Figure 2:** Circular flow of the Institutional School Development Program (ISP; source: Dalin, Rolff, & Buchen, 1998, p. 267)



In the individual phases of the circular flow, steering groups assume the following prototypical responsibilities:

- *Make joint diagnosis*

The steering group obtains great relevance primarily at the beginning of the school development process. The group initiates taking stock of the state of developments at the respective school and, on behalf of the staff, diagnoses strengths and weaknesses after having selected, or developed, the instruments for this diagnosis. In this phase, the steering group also holds a feedback confer-



ence with the entire staff where data is analyzed collectively and possible consequences are discussed.

- *Agree on goals*

In this phase, the steering group moderates the process. In terms of participation, the goals should be agreed upon and supported by the entire staff.

- *Plan development projects*

The steering group supports the staff in setting priorities for planning measures.

- *Implement developments*

In the course of the process of school development, the steering group coordinates the individual projects (for example projects of instruction development). The group ensures the exchange of experience within and between the individual workgroups and the project groups, accompanies individual projects and combines project work with the development of the entire school. Additionally, the steering group coordinates the needs for qualification resulting from school development.

- *Evaluate results*

Finally, the steering group ensures the evaluation of the initiated measures and projects by introducing and preparing the evaluation within the school jointly with the school leadership. In this process, the steering group supports the workgroups in the application resp. development of instruments for quality assurance.

Over the course of the entire process, the steering group ensures the flow of information between staff members and everyone involved in the school development process (primarily parents, students and, possibly, cooperation partners external to the schools). When introducing the external evaluation, the steering group also attends this evaluation.

### **3.2 Responsibilities of steering groups: School development processes and change management**

Following Dalin and Rolff (1990), Holtappels (2007) as well as Holtappels and Feldhoff (2010) attempt to describe steering groups as change agents on the basis of findings from innovation research (e.g. Holtappels, 2004; Miles & Huberman, 1984), organizational learning (e.g. Argyris, 1997; Senge, 1996), change management (e.g. Doppler & Lauterburg, 2005) and school development research. Holtappels (2007) distinguishes between three major forms of change management in the domain of school development:

1. Change management as knowledge management, where there is a coordination and dissemination of knowledge relevant to the organization.
2. Change management as steering process management, as systematic school development requires process management.

3. Change management as coordinating the networking of project groups and teams in the school development process.

In the domain of knowledge management, steering groups primarily take on the tasks of documentation, of analyses of problems and processes, and of the “transfer of practice-related research discoveries” (Holtappels 2007, p. 29 ff., translation by the authors). In the domain of process management, steering groups coordinate different teams within the school, organize the flow and sequence of school development processes, moderate the processes of planning and decision-making, and ensure the adherence to and implementation of projects and measures arranged in the school. In the domain of consulting and support, steering groups lend their support to the project groups and workgroups, and act as contact for these teams. Furthermore, steering groups ensure the organization of the team structures at the respective schools. They also support the principal by taking over some of the duties that were previously the sole responsibility of the principal.

## **4. Problems and dilemmas of steering groups**

In their work with various school actors and in the context of the initiated transformation processes, steering groups constantly perceive themselves as being in areas of tension and face conflicts (Huber, 2009). Frequently, these areas of tension are determined by structures. They emerge as a result of conceptual uncertainties. Questions of feasibility also play a part in this respect. What constitutes the experience of such an area of tension in practice cannot be clearly described in each case. In the following, different of such areas are described based on researchers’ observations in discussions on school development.

### **4.1 Double dilemma**

Horster (1998) considers steering groups to face a double dilemma. First, it would be beneficial if the entire staff was represented in the composition of the steering group to ensure that a school development project is designed and supported by the greatest possible number of staff members (Horster names in this respect the different levels of hierarchy, different groups within the staff, the age and gender structure, as well as the attitude towards development projects). The first dilemma is that the members of a steering group composed this way could hamper each other so that they no longer would function as a group at all. The necessary means to prevent such a situation (Horster identified for instance the development of a certain interaction frequency, interdependent relationships and a role system) in turn cause a second dilemma: “The more it [the steering group] develops into a group, the more it simultaneously isolates itself from other members of

the staff and its subgroups. [...] This has consequences for the relationships among the steering group members and for the steering group's fulfillment of its responsibilities" (Horster, 1998, p. 80, translation by the authors). Horster (1998) summarizes that "... the first dilemma of the steering group concerns its internal structure, the second its external relationships to other members of the school as an organization" (p. 80, translation by the authors).

## 4.2 Relationship to school leadership

Even though a steering group has process expertise and a mandate from staff, the overall responsibility for the school development processes remains with the principal.

The principal should be a member of the steering group, but not its speaker. In terms of aspects of self-organization, such as personnel development and acceptance of an implementation, it is much more reasonable to elect the speaker of the steering group from the group of teachers who are members of the steering group. For large steering groups, it is advisable to elect two speakers, ideally a woman and a man. If two people chair the group, they can support each other in learning to lead. Furthermore, this means a noticeable move in terms of personnel development, as including both genders will increase the acceptance of the steering group and its organization.

Even though the principal passes on chairing the steering group, the principal's role will be highly meaningful for the work of this group. The principal must review the concepts and/or results of the steering group in terms of the likelihood of putting them into practice and is responsible for the implementation of these concepts. Furthermore, the principal needs to support the work of the steering group.

Comprehensive processes of school development have little chance of success if they lack the active support of the school leadership. Principals need to develop an understanding of which role and which task they want to assume in the process of school development, how they provide impetus on one hand and how they can rely on staff initiative on the other. One of their most important tasks is to create for the staff such conditions and relief from other responsibilities which allow to maintain the commitment and initiative of the staff for school development (Huber, 2009).

From the viewpoint of social psychology, the role of the school leadership in steering groups is a difficult one, or at least it requires a period of adjustment, since it means that a hierarch needs to participate in non-hierarchical relationships. Within a steering group, the principal is an ordinary member without special rights. If a principal insists on having special rights, this will break the framework of the steering group. However, this role provides the principal with a much greater proximity to colleagues and, most notably, with a place of mutual consultation and creativity.

Huber (2009) argues that for this complex role of the principal to function and for the steering group to work successfully, a clarification of the relationship and the collaboration between the school leadership and the steering group is required. The quality of this relationship has fundamental significance for the development process at the respective school. Therefore, this relationship is highly sensitive and may even carry the potential for conflicts, as it involves, in a more or less open manner, aspects such as (self)-confidence, influence and power, independence, information, and coalition building. Last but not least, the steering group is a place of learning, also for the school leadership.

Various experiences in the area of school and organization development show that the principal should not lead the steering group. Nevertheless, within the framework of project management, principals may appoint and lead committees and working groups, for instance budget committees. These bodies, however, have different functions than steering groups.

#### **4.3 Relationship to staff**

Messner and Altrichter (1998) emphasize that the introduction of steering groups threatens the existing “autonomy parity pattern” in schools (Messner & Altrichter, 1998, p. 52, translation by the authors; a first definition of the “autonomy parity pattern” was offered by Lortie, 1975). By setting up steering groups, teachers are hierarchically positioned, which suspends the imperative of equity of all teachers. “Leadership in schools can apparently only be performed if legitimized by law, exercised on external assignment (i.e. limited to school administration), or if it, covertly and eerily, occurs on an informal level” (ibid., translation by the authors). Messner and Altrichter point out different constellations in the triangular relationship of school leadership, steering group and staff. On the one hand, a steering group may not recede too far from the staff, so that the group is not perceived as an amplification of the school leadership. On the other hand, the group must not develop into a structure parallel to or competing with the school leadership. To overcome this problem and to achieve a balance in the triangular relationship, the steering group should internally exchange information about, and clarify, the respective areas of expertise of the steering group on one side and the school leadership on the other, while externally the steering group should try to ensure good communication and maximum transparency (Dalín et al., 1998; Messner & Altrichter, 1998). The group should inform the staff on upcoming tasks regularly and in detail, address emerging conflicts and discuss them openly.

Consequently, the steering group is required to closely listen to the staff of the school, which means to sensitively register moods, wishes and interests and consider them when planning and conducting the consecutive steps in the school development process. The steering group is also exposed to criticism of the staff, and needs to accept different interests and views as well as perceive signals for with-

drawal, overload and excessive demands, discuss them and intensively search for ways to find relief from such burdens.

Sometimes, the steering group as the driving force in the process of school development may be experienced by the staff as an agency that wishes to “heap” even more on top of the traditional workload of daily school life, demands the additional commitment of time and energy and, if this was refused, contributes to the bad conscience that one “is not doing enough” (for the following details, see Feldhoff, Kanders, & Rolff, 2008).

Furthermore, the steering group has special information and reporting obligations to the staff. Steering groups need to regularly inform staff members and keep them up to date, strive to achieve maximum transparency of their own work and regarding the development process, make the common thread of the process stages easily identifiable at all times and provide staff members with an overview of the next stages in the process.

The task of motivating and encouraging the staff can also fall to the steering group. People are, for instance, motivated when they experience themselves as being competent or when they notice progress and success, and can evaluate this as a result of their own actions. For steering groups this means:

- building on the strengths and expertise of their colleagues and valuing and supporting their initiatives;
- taking up all ideas, proposals and suggestions and ensuring their consideration among the staff;
- creating in the school an atmosphere of attentiveness and emphasizing the positive, of achievements and progress, as well as appreciating effort and commitment of colleagues in case of lacking or slowly developing success;
- providing the individual, subject-specific workgroups with feedback on their success and announcing such success within in the school.

On account of its work in the entire school, a steering group is capable of supporting the thematic workgroups in the organization and reflection of their actions. The steering group can provide advice if it has the impression that a workgroup strays from its plan. However, the workgroups can also put forward questions and problems in the steering group. It is not necessary to present finished solutions or to give instructions but rather to stimulate the ongoing efforts within the workgroup by providing a fresh perspective.

In sum, the relationship of steering group and staff has the potential for conflict: “On the one hand, as the driving force of the [school development] process, the steering group wants to convince, integrate and motivate skeptic staff members, on the other hand, as a barometer of opinion and a buffer zone, the steering group does not want to impose developments on staff members. The steering group regards itself as a body of support and does not want to stand in opposition to the staff members. This conflict is resolved differently in each school” (Herrmann, 2000, p. 7, translation by the authors).

#### **4.4 Tendency to parallel structures**

Horster (1998) describes differences other groups in the schools in two respects: On the one hand, steering groups feature certain formal characteristics that bring them in close proximity to other formal (decision-making) boards (e.g. student councils or faculties at universities): They have a certain mandate, membership is regulated by declared procedures, they possess a determined size and composition, and they fulfill substantial and organizational tasks in the school. On the other hand, steering groups are, or were until recently, in many countries not implemented in school law and, as opposed to the formal boards, often just have a mandate for a certain period of time and thus a temporary character.

Although they are integrated in a well conceived way into the school organization in the sparse research that provides a theoretical basis for steering groups, this is not necessarily the case when put into practice. In certain circumstances, steering groups are experienced in exactly the opposite way: They are seen as standing outside the formal levels of hierarchy and decision making within the staff, which are a traditional part of school law to date.

On the one hand, steering groups handle control and management responsibilities, i.e. tasks and roles which constitute the classic administrative organization; on the other hand, they are not structurally included there. Hence, they may be regarded as a kind of “parallel organization”. In consequence, they may be viewed as a “parallel or competing structure” (Rolff, 2001, p. 26, translation by the authors).

#### **4.5 Tendency to hierarchy**

Within the staff, steering groups constitute an atypical body: “The establishment of a steering group threatens the prevalent ‘autonomy parity pattern’ in schools: It [the steering group] allocates steering responsibilities to [some of the] formally equal teachers and thus ranks some staff members higher than others (Messner & Altrichter, 1998, as cited in Lohmann & Minderop, 2004, p. 159, translation by the authors). Krainz-Dürr identifies an “anti-hierarchical” effect in traditional schools, which complicates the recognition and identification of leadership and management responsibilities as such. This can lead to insecurities and ambiguities in terms of the roles of the participants (Krainz-Dürr, 2002, p. 71). The staff may question the legitimacy of the work, and possible decision-taking, of the steering group. The members of the steering group are neither designated in their office or capacity to the staff or school leadership, nor are they elected by the staff in each case (other than, for instance, a staff council). The reasons why teachers become members of steering groups may not be transparent and arouse suspicion: Maybe they volunteered and they are suspected of being overly ambitious, of being obsessive to distinguish themselves or to dominate, or they were the choice of the principal and thus arouse suspicion of being the principal’s “vassals”. Or maybe they obtained their ancillary role rather accidentally. Since the traditional un-

derstanding of a profession emanates from the established initial qualifications for certain tasks, for instance by following a traditional understanding of professional (further) qualification, the position of the steering group members remains atypical also against this backdrop. Consequently, staff members may not accept the role of the steering group or the assignment of individual steering group members for the work process in question. However, according to Rolff (2006) analyses show “that the effectiveness of the work of steering groups is critically dependant on the acceptance of the steering group by staff members” (p. 344, translation by the authors). For this reason, it is necessary to regularly assess the acceptance of steering groups, ideally by mandating the steering groups through a resolution of the whole staff.

## 5. Empirical studies on steering groups

Steering groups have been introduced and established relatively recently. Initially, the scientific community did not pay attention to research on steering groups, which meant that first empirical findings on steering groups were gathered in studies on innovation projects or school programs. Steering groups were first explored on the fringes of research, so to speak. Holtappels (2007) comes to the conclusion that steering groups contributed to a change in the learning culture and organization in innovation projects in Lower Saxony and Hamburg as early as the 1990s. In these projects, steering groups primarily took on the tasks of concept development as well as tasks of administration and organization (Holtappels, 2007). A nationwide survey on the development of all-day schools throughout Germany revealed that 67% of all-day schools have a concept group or steering group. In the area of school program work, steering groups are equally active: 65% of the schools studied in Hamburg and 75% of the schools studied in North Rhine-Westphalia with regard to school program work feature a steering group (Holtappels, 2004; Kanders, 2002).

At the Institute for School Development Research at the University of Dortmund, two studies were conducted in recent years which were dedicated, both explicitly and theory-driven, to research on the effectiveness of school steering groups in transformation processes. In the following, key findings of these two studies will be presented.

### 5.1 Steering groups in the project *Quality Development in Networks in Lower Saxony*

The first of the two large quantitative studies was conducted in 2004 by Berkemeyer and Holtappels within the scope of the project *Quality Development in Networks in Lower Saxony*. In this project, 64 schools from all school types field-



tested the cooperation in regional school networks, which focused on school program work, innovative teaching methods, and evaluation, for the purpose of improving school quality (Berkemeyer & Holtappels, 2007). In a sub-study conducted in this context, Berkemeyer and Holtappels focused on the practices and the impact of school steering groups in terms of quality development in the schools, and on the action and impact of the steering groups as collective actors (Berkemeyer & Holtappels, 2007). In this study, both the members of the steering groups themselves and the staff were surveyed with regard to the capacity of the steering groups at the schools participating in the project. The results show significant overlaps with those responsibilities and tasks of the steering groups identified and phrased by Dalin and Rolff (1990) in the *Institutional School Development Program* (ISP).

**Table 1:** Responsibilities of school steering groups from the perspective of teachers and steering groups (source: Berkemeyer & Holtappels, 2007, p. 119)

Responsibilities of the steering group	SG (in %)	Teachers (in %)	$d^1$
Job-delegating responsibility	62.7	32.9	0.30
Consulting responsibility	74.5	33.9	0.75
Moderating responsibility	81.0	17.9	1.14
Orienting responsibility	89.6	17.2	1.41
Coordinating responsibility	90.4	28.8	1.27
Organizing responsibility	90.8	30.0	1.25
Informing responsibility	92.3	21.8	1.61

Note.  $N = 360$  SG, agree and generally agree, summarized.

<sup>1</sup> Cohen's  $d$  is an effect size that measures the size of the different between two means.

According to the self-perception of the steering groups, these groups perform primarily informative, organizational, coordinating, orienting and moderating tasks. In contrast, they do not usually delegate work and only rarely consult teachers (see Table 1). With the exception of the tasks of delegating and consulting, the differences in perceptions between the teachers and the steering groups are very large and statistically significant. Berkemeyer and Holtappels (2007) assume that it is difficult for some teachers to evaluate the specific activities of the steering groups since they observe these activities less frequently when they are not personally involved. This means that many organizational activities probably occur rather in the background and are not very visible for most of the staff. Beyond these descriptive results, Berkemeyer and Holtappels (2007) used a regression model to examine the impact of the approval for a steering group by the staff, the impact of effective actions by the school leadership, consensus on targets among the staff and the practice of open forms of learning on teacher cooperation in class. The regression model explained 74% of the variance in teacher cooperation. Among the independent variables, the influence of the consensus on targets among the staff was significant ( $\beta = .43$ ), as was the practice of open forms of learning ( $\beta = .27$ ) and the approval for a steering group by the staff ( $\beta = .20$ ).



In sum, Berkemeyer and Holtappels (2007) draw a positive conclusion. The self-organization and team quality of the steering group in particular have contributed to newly “establishing operative actors” in the project (ibid., p. 136, translation by the authors). In this process, they attribute relatively great relevance to programs of continuing education. They critically evaluate, however, the comparatively low approval for the steering group by the staff and the threat of the school leadership dominating the steering group. They conclude that in the project *Quality Development in Networks in Lower Saxony*, steering groups “proved to be a significant form of change management” (ibid., p. 137, translation by the authors).

## **5.2 Steering groups in the pilot project *Self-governing School in North Rhine-Westphalia***

School steering groups were also included in the design of the pilot project *Self-governing School NRW (North Rhine-Westphalia)* from the outset of this project. Each of the 278 schools was required to implement a steering group at the beginning of the project. The task of the steering groups was to strengthen the schools’ infrastructure and the professional steering and coordination of the different schemes in the pilot project, primarily in the domain of the development of instruction (Weisker, 2004). To prepare for these tasks, the members of the steering groups participated in various qualifying courses (Feldhoff, 2007; Feldhoff & Gebauer, 2008).

In the final report of the research to accompany and evaluate this project, Feldhoff et al. (2008) present selected findings on the tasks of the steering groups according to the groups’ self-assessment. The authors come to the conclusion that one focus of the work of steering groups in the pilot project is on qualifications of school personnel, with a special emphasis on organizing and coordinating continuing education, which assumed particular importance in this project in the domain of the development of instruction. According to the findings from Feldhoff et al. (2008), steering groups organized 87% of a school’s internal continuing education and 56% of the external continuing education over the project period. Appropriate continuing education for teachers on the development of instruction is organized by even 88% of the steering groups. Almost half of the steering groups are also responsible for student training in the context of the development of instruction. Moreover, 67% of the steering groups ensure an appropriate flow of information in the school. A further focal point of the steering groups’ work is consulting for and support of project groups and/or individual staff members. Depending on the mode of the consulting and support, between 50 and 75% of all the steering groups in the pilot project perform this task. A key task of the steering groups, according to their own assessment, is coordinating project groups and workgroups. This task is performed by 80% of the steering groups.

Consequently, steering groups within the project assume tasks of transformation processes as described by Dalin and Rolff (1990) as well as Holtappels (2007; see section 3). Hence, not only the results of Berkemeyer and Holtappels (2007) of the study in Lower Saxony can be confirmed, but also the results concerning the conceptual and theoretical assumptions about the tasks and functions of steering groups (see section 3). However, it cannot be ruled out that the results partly reflect the extent to which the steering groups implemented those conceptual guidelines that were taught in the qualifying procedures.

*Acceptance, role clarity and effectiveness of steering groups*

Beyond the tasks and responsibilities of steering groups as described above, Feldhoff et al. (2008) name three key constructs that provide information about the tasks of school steering groups and how they work in transformation processes in the pilot project. Steering groups depend on the approval of the staff (see sections 2 and 4), as they have such a specific structure, are not integrated into the formal hierarchy of a school, lack the formal authority granted to other administrative bodies of a school, and do not have established and binding responsibilities and competencies (see section 2, Berkemeyer et al., 2007). The steering group usually is appointed by, and agrees upon its responsibilities with, the teachers' conference at a school. Hence, for the steering group to work successfully, a sufficient minimum of approval for the steering group by the staff can be regarded as a prerequisite. Concepts of organizational change therefore emphasize the necessity of such an approval in the context of transformation processes (see section 3).

A second key aspect for the successful work of a steering group is the clarity of its role, since the steering group is in constant negotiation with school actors, staff and school leadership with regard to the groups' competencies and responsibilities (see sections 2.2, 4.2 and 4.3). This negotiation is further complicated by the involvement of the principal in the steering group. On the one hand, the principal is the highest authority at the school, on the other hand, he or she is an equal member of the steering group. Consequently, the constellation between the different school actors – steering group, staff and school leadership – can be described as a very dynamic structure. Within this structure, the tasks and responsibilities as well as the balance of power in interaction associated with the tasks and responsibilities, must be constantly negotiated and adapted. For this to work, constant transparency is indispensable by clarifying the role of the steering group in the organization of the school. Next to the specific tasks and capacities of a steering group, the two aspects described above, acceptance and role clarity, have an impact on the perceived effectiveness of the steering group, the third key aspect.

**Table 2:** Aspects of school management (source: Feldhoff et al., 2008, p. 160)

Scales	Respondent	Year of data collection	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>	$\alpha$
Acceptance of the steering group in the school	Principal	2007	3.18	0.523	107	.86
	Steering group	2007	2.89	0.538	221	.87
	Teacher	2007	2.77	0.436	70	.90
Role clarity of the steering group in the school as an organization	Principal	2007	3.50	0.477	106	.72
	Steering group	2007	3.21	0.465	222	.80
	Teacher	2007	2.61	0.450	70	.89
Effectiveness of the steering group	Principal	2007	3.40	0.520	104	.60
	Steering group	2007	3.20	0.468	222	.69
	Teacher	2007	2.75	0.462	70	.89

Note. Answer categories of the used scales: disagree (1) to agree (4). For this comparison, the principals were factored out. Data from teachers and steering group members were aggregated at school level.

As no significant changes in the responses of the individual actors over the course of the pilot project in the three aspects assessed could be found, only the results of the last survey from 2007 are presented in the following. As expected, the acceptance of the steering group was viewed most critically by teachers, followed by the members of the steering groups themselves and the principals (Feldhoff et al., 2008). The steering groups themselves assess the groups' acceptance by the staff as fairly good, their assessment is slightly more positive than the groups' assessment by the teachers ( $d = 0.28$ )<sup>2</sup>. In contrast, the principals evaluate the groups' acceptance significantly better. Their responses differ in this respect very clearly from those of the teachers ( $d = 0.94$ ) and the steering groups ( $d = 0.54$ ).

As compared to the acceptance of the steering group, its role clarity is valued slightly less positively by the teachers. The mean value of the steering groups' self-perceptions in terms of role clarity is significantly higher than the according value of staff members ( $d = 1.33$ ). The principal responds with the highest estimation of the role clarity of the three groups compared. This shows that a steering group can establish its role relatively clearly and congruently for both the group itself and the principal, but that the group does not succeed to the same extent in conveying this clarity to the teachers.

The teachers in this survey estimate the effectiveness of the steering group positively, at about the same level as they estimate the groups' acceptance. The steering group members themselves and the school leadership ( $d > 0.9$ ) evaluate the effectiveness significantly more positively. A reason for this could be that some activities and responsibilities of the steering group are rather outside the focus of the teachers' attention and thus the group's effectiveness is somewhat underrated by the staff members. However, it is also possible that the steering group and the principal overrate their work to some degree.

2 Cohen's  $d$  is an effect size that measures the size of the difference between two means.

### *Relationship between steering group and extended school leadership*

In the pilot project, the problem of competition of the steering group with other management structures, such as the extended school leadership, was further examined (see section 4.4). The steering groups were asked about their relationship with the extended school leadership team. The group members stated that this relationship was quite positive ( $M = 2.73$ ). Thus this potential area of tension does not seem to be a problem, at least from the viewpoint of most steering groups. When regarding the standard deviation ( $SD = 0.534$ ), we see, however, that this positive relationship cannot be found in all participating schools. Yet the teachers' responses show that there is a negative relation, if a minor one, between the existence of an extended school leadership and the three scales of acceptance ( $r = -.246$ ), role clarity ( $r = -.188$ ) and effectiveness ( $r = -.164$ ). This points to a certain potential for conflicts between the two actors (see section 4.4 on problems and dilemmas), which needs to be studied in more detail in further research. The according research question would be: What kind of conditions and distribution of tasks are required for a productive coexistence of an extended school leadership team and a steering group?

### *The double responsibility of the principle*

When steering groups are established at a school, the principal is challenged in his or her administrative abilities by possible conflicts that arise from a dual role. As described above (see section 4.2), the principal must consider when to assume in a steering group the role of principal and when to assume the role of an "ordinary" group member. In the pilot project, the principal and the steering groups were asked whether the principal uses his or her privileged position within the steering group to enforce decisions (see Table 3). While the principal views him or herself as restrained with regard to its position of power, the steering group perceives the school leadership rather as a power promoter. However, the overall low mean values indicate that questions of power are only in a few steering groups of considerable significance (see Table 3). The differences in the mean values translate into medium effect sizes.

**Table 3:** Use of the privileged position by the school leadership (source: Feldhoff et al., 2008, p. 163)

Scales	Year of data collection	Respondent	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
School leadership uses its privileged position to enforce decisions within the SG, too	2007	Principal	1.64	0.665	106
	2007	Steering group	2.04	0.698	221

*Note.* Answer categories of the used scales: disagree (1) to agree (4). For this comparison, the principals were factored out. Data from teachers and steering group members were aggregated at school level.

*Relief and consulting responsibilities of the steering groups*

As discussed above, reinforcing the level of school management through the introduction of steering groups can be regarded as support for the principal. Two forms of support were studied in the pilot project *Self-governing School*: the steering groups can support the school administration by taking over tasks of school organization and also offer advice to the principal.

A main responsibility of the steering groups is to coordinate the school development processes and the continuing education related to the implementation of steering groups. The steering groups assume the responsibility for tasks that did not exist before, or fell in the responsibility of the principal. Feldhoff et al. (2008) show that principals receive noticeable support from steering groups (see Table 4). The fact that the mean value differences between principal and steering group are not significant underscores the congruence of these perceptions.

**Table 4:** Differences in perception between the school leadership and the steering group (source: Feldhoff et al., 2008, p. 164)

Scales	Year of data collection	Respondent	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>N</i>
The school leadership is relieved by the SG	2007	Principal	3.34	0.800	107
	2007	Steering group	3.20	0.634	222
The school leadership consults the SG in important decisions	2007	Principal	3.54	0.648	107
	2007	Steering group	3.24	0.583	222
The school leadership involves the SG in important decisions	2007	Principal	3.49	0.732	107
	2007	Steering group	3.08	0.647	222

*Note.* Answer categories of the used scales: disagree (1) to agree (4). For this comparison, the principals were factored out. Data from teachers and steering group members were aggregated at school level.

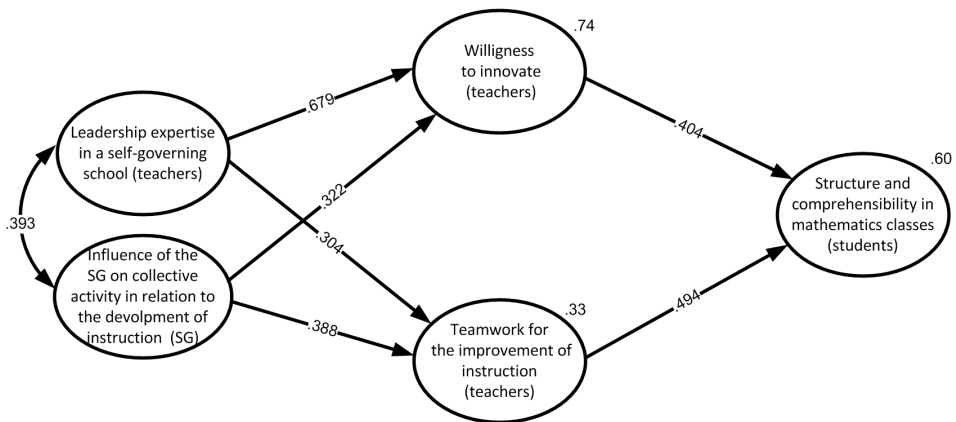
*Influence of school leadership and steering groups on quality of instruction as part of organizational learning*

In addition to the descriptive analyses presented above, Feldhoff and Rolff (2008) have investigated the influence of the actions of both school leadership and steering group for the development of instruction as part of Organizational Learning. The theoretical concept of Organizational Learning has seven dimensions, four of which are included in the model analyzed in the following, with one of the four dimensions being modeled by two different constructs. According to the authors, steering groups as well school leadership, which are both part of the dimension “leadership and management” of Organizational Learning, can have an impact on instruction-related cooperation among the staff as part of the dimension “shared commitment and collaborative activity”, for instance by supporting the working groups for development of instruction. As part of the dimension “knowledge and

skills”, the steering group can also transfer external knowledge into the schools, as it is for instance conveyed in continuing education, and help teachers embracing new approaches and concepts for the development of instruction.

These assumptions from Organizational Learning theory were examined on school level with a structural equation model. The according model by Feldhoff and Rolff (2008) uses the following constructs: The actions of the school leadership are included in the model as the scale on “leadership expertise in a self-governing school” (as perceived by the staff). This scale contains the key aspects of leadership action as part of the dimension “leadership and management” of the capacity for Organizational Learning. The actions of the steering groups are included as the scale on “influence of the steering group on team work in terms of development of instruction” (as perceived by the school steering groups). The teachers’ willingness to innovate (as perceived by the staff) is chosen as an indicator for the dimension “knowledge and skills”. Further, a scale on “teamwork for the improvement of the instruction” is included as an indicator for the dimension “shared commitment and collaborative activity”. This scale refers to a mode of teacher cooperation that explicitly has the improvement of instruction as an objective of their collective activities. Quality of instruction is modeled by a scale on “structure and comprehensibility in mathematics classes” (as perceived by the students).

**Figure 3:** Influence of actions by the school leadership and steering groups on quality of instruction in mathematics (source: Feldhoff & Rolff, 2008, p. 296)



The fit statistics of this model (CFI = .939, TLI = .930, RSMEA = .085,  $\chi^2/DF = 1.50$ ,  $N = 70$ ) indicate a satisfactory fit of the theoretical model to the empirical data.

The results of this analysis show a reciprocal relationship between the two aspects “leadership expertise of the school leadership” and “influence of the steering group on teamwork in relation to the development of instruction” of the dimension “leadership and management”. Both aspects have themselves an influence on two constructs: on the dimension “knowledge and skills” in terms of the staff’s

willingness to innovate, and on the dimension “shared commitment and collaborative activity” in terms of teamwork for the improvement of instruction. In turn, the dimension “knowledge and skills” and the dimension “shared commitment and collaborative activity” have an impact on the structure and the quality of instruction in mathematics classes in terms of the structure and the ability to comprehend as perceived by the students. The steering group, with its influence on teamwork regarding the development of instruction, has an indirect influence on the quality of instruction in mathematics, both mediated by the willingness to innovate ( $\beta = .130$ ) and by the teamwork for the improvement of instruction ( $\beta = .192$ ). In the chosen model, 33% of the variance of the teamwork focusing on improving instruction, 74% of the variance in the willingness to innovate and 60% of the variance in the structure of mathematics classes the ability to comprehend in these classes. This correlation can be found also with regard to the quality of instruction in the school subject German.

The result shows that steering groups as part of the dimension “leadership and management” positively influence other dimensions, for instance the dimensions “knowledge and skills” and “shared commitment and collaborative activity”. Mediated via these dimensions, steering groups have, furthermore, a traceable influence on aspects of instructional quality.

## 6. Alternatives to steering groups

In international comparison, as well as in many schools in Germany, we see that the tasks and roles which steering groups can assume as part of transformation processes, are integrated to a far greater extent into the structure of the leadership organization of schools, as this has been traditionally the case in German schools. An OECD report on England (OECD Report Case Studies; Huber, Moorman, & Pont, 2009), for instance, describes how clarity regarding responsibilities was created at the English schools surveyed for this study by means of highly complex but functionally efficient and externally clearly defined roles as well as descriptions of structures and processes. This meant that certain tasks which are relevant for school development were not reassigned to a steering group, but rather remained a part of the general leadership organization, for instance in the form of “distributed leadership” or an extended school administration.

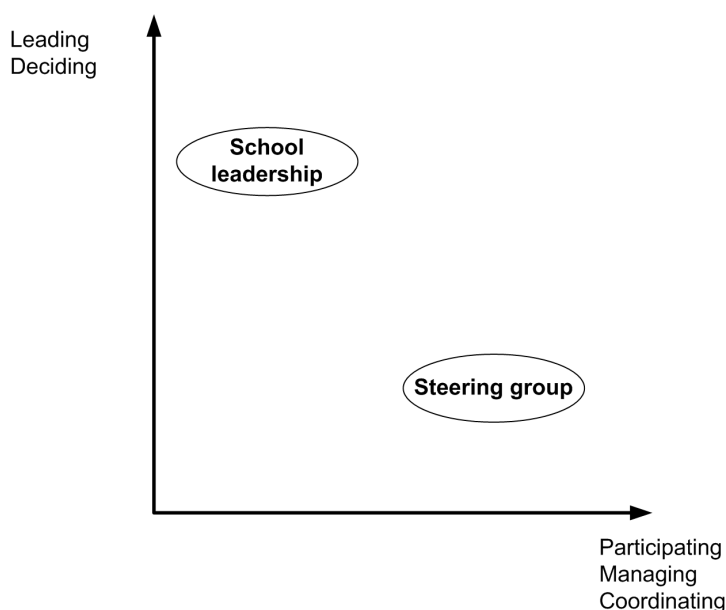
This situation raises the question: Are there alternatives to steering groups which constitute functional equivalents? It is obvious that development of instruction or quality management on a day-to-day basis is neither the task nor the everyday business of steering groups. Such tasks are rather handled in subject conferences or in grade-specific or quality-specific workgroups at each school. Steering groups merely initiate, design and coordinate such tasks and processes. The same applies to leadership teams, with the substantial difference that these teams also make decisions about directions, content and institutionalizations of instruction-



al processes and quality development. Steering groups, in contrast, only prepare recommendations for the school leadership and the teachers' conference. However, the steering groups prepare their concepts and recommendations in close collaboration and on par with the teachers and their workgroups. Therefore, steering groups are based on cooperation and consensus; for instance, only consensual recommendations are submitted to the school leadership. For this reason, steering groups as Change Agents (see section 3), if appropriately introduced and established, do not represent a parallel structure but rather a different quality of school development, which is initiated by the school leadership, coordinated by the steering group, and shaped as well as implemented by the whole staff of a school. Thus, the steering group employs and raises the professional capacity of the whole staff.

School leadership and steering groups undoubtedly steer the two major processes of school development: leading and deciding on the one hand, participating, managing and co-ordinating on the other. However, these two modes of steering are positioned quite differently, as can be seen in Figure 4.

**Figure 4:** Localization of steering by school leadership and steering group



The school leadership, even if extended and disseminated, leads the school and its development and makes the relevant decisions. The steering group, in contrast, is not in charge of either task. However, this group manages and coordinates transformation processes and organizes the participation in these processes as well as their acceptance and sustainability in terms of concepts of organizational change. This leads back to the question posed above: Extended school leadership (as a dis-



seminated leadership), or steering groups that involve the whole school staff in school development processes? From the viewpoint of empirical research, our results might offer some support for the assumption that steering groups are able to successfully steer and arrange transformation processes. However, we cannot provide an answer to the question whether an extended school leadership or a steering group is more appropriate. Such conclusions could only be drawn adequately based on suitable comparative studies. The experiences of more than 20 years of research on steering groups in Germany, Austria and Switzerland referred to in this research article show that the alternative between an extended school leadership and steering groups seems to be merely a virtual one. Our considerations and studies suggest that a systematic synthesis of both, an extended and disseminated school leadership and steering group work, is most effective for school development.

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## WAXMANN

Im Jahr 2009 hat Deutschland bereits zum vierten Mal *am Programme for International Student Assessment* (PISA) der OECD teilgenommen. Erfasst wurden die Kompetenzen von fünfzehnjährigen Schülerinnen und Schülern in den Bereichen Lesen, Mathematik und Naturwissenschaften in 65 Staaten weltweit. In Deutschland rief die erste PISA-Studie, die auf Erhebungen des Jahres 2000 beruht, ein überwältigendes Echo in der Öffentlichkeit, in der Bildungspolitik, in vielen Teilen der Wissenschaft und in der Bildungspraxis hervor. Sie untersuchte vor allem den Bereich des Lesens und lieferte detaillierte Informationen über den Kompetenzstand von Fünfzehnjährigen im internationalen Vergleich. Im Jahr 2003 war Mathematik der Schwerpunkt, im Jahr 2006 die naturwissenschaftlichen Kompetenzen, womit der erste Erhebungszyklus abgeschlossen war.

PISA 2009 kehrt nun zu den Anfängen zurück. Wieder ist die Lesekompetenz der Schwerpunkt der Untersuchung. Auch die mathematischen und naturwissenschaftlichen Kompetenzen wurden erhoben, ebenso wie Informationen über Ressourcen und Lernumgebungen.

Dieses Buch stellt den Ist-Stand im Jahr 2009 dar und verknüpft ihn mit den Entwicklungen zwischen den Jahren 2000 und 2009. Über welche Kompetenzen verfügen deutsche Schülerinnen und Schüler, und wie haben sich diese verändert? Wie sehen häusliche und schulische Lernumgebungen aus? Wie haben sich Rahmenbedingungen und Ergebnisse von Bildungsprozessen, aber auch Schulen und außerschulische Faktoren verändert? Wie lässt sich diese Entwicklung beurteilen, wenn man sie in den internationalen Vergleich einordnet?

Eckhard Klieme, Cordula Artelt, Johannes Hartig, Nina Jude, Olaf Köller, Manfred Prenzel, Wolfgang Schneider, Petra Stanat (Hrsg.)

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